



Whirlwind: The American Revolution and the War That Won It by John Ferling.

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In April 1776, John Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail, that he and his fellow delegates to the Second Continental Congress required “Temper ... Understanding and ... Courage ... to ride in this Whirlwind” (147). Open hostilities had commenced a year earlier at the battles of Lexington and Concord. American arms had generally performed well during the *rage militaire* of 1775, but, as 1776 began, the delegates knew that British reinforcements were on their way, and the Congressmen had not decided whether they were fighting for independence or reconciliation as Britons with full constitutional rights within the empire.

In *Whirlwind*, John Ferling (Univ. of West Georgia) examines the American Revolution from Britain’s ultimate victory in the Seven Years’ War (1763) to the signing of the Treaty of Paris (1783), which secured independence for the United States of America. This is Ferling’s tenth book on the Revolutionary period, and his intimate familiarity with the relevant archival and secondary sources is apparent throughout.

The author aims to distinguish between the Revolution and the War of Independence, place ordinary Americans alongside the Founding Fathers as key actors, reveal the faults and foibles of the Founders as well as their virtues, and demonstrate the role of contingency in both the war and the Revolution. He argues that colonists were generally happy with the imperial relationship in the 1760s, but went through a process of protests, insurgency, revolution, and war that made reconciliation impossible and the Declaration of Independence inevitable. British mistakes, not American political-military genius, were decisive in the success of the Revolution and the founding of a new nation on the radical principle of equality.

The book comprises two parts. The first explores the events leading up to the Declaration of Independence, while the second centers on the war and its consequences. The author distinguishes four phases in the Revolution and four turning points in the war itself, namely, the declaration of independence (1776), the securing of French support (1778), Britain’s seizure of the initiative (1780), and the Franco-American victory at Yorktown (1781). Although Ferling analyzes ideological, social, political, and military aspects of the Revolution, he stresses economic factors in the dispute between Britain and its colonies.

Ferling begins by assessing the costs and benefits of the imperial relationship and shows that, although colonists thought of themselves as Britons in the early 1760s, “Empires exist for the benefit of the parent state. That, and the fact that the colonists eventually came to appreciate this truth, goes a long way toward explaining the origins of the American Revolution” (4).

Ferling next shows that the £146 million debt from the Seven Years’ War caused Parliament to try to exert greater authority over the colonies, thus initiating the colonial protest phase in 1764. Britain’s impingement upon the colonists’ autonomy, especially in economic matters, made them worry about their “means of controlling their destiny” (27). The Sugar, Currency, Mutiny, and Stamp Acts, as well as the Proclamation of 1763, sparked protests over Parliament’s power. Some colonists began to believe British and American interests were not identical. Ferling contends that “popular uprisings throughout

the land” (30), rather than the Stamp Act Congress or the Virginia Resolves, nullified the hated tax. The colonists’ fundamental problem with the imperial relationship was Britain’s insistence that they “must bow to the unqualified will of Parliament” (35).

Britain’s adoption of the Townshend Duties triggered a shift from protest to outright insurgency in the colonies between 1767 and 1770. The “Revenue Act of 1767 was a naked attempt to assert parliamentary sovereignty” (41), Ferling writes. It levied a direct tax to pay for the civil list instead of the army in America. In 1767, John Dickinson attacked the Townshend Duties¹ on constitutional grounds, but acknowledged Parliament’s authority to regulate imperial trade. Colonial preachers spread this critique from their pulpits. Secretary of State for the Colonies Lord Hillsborough’s heavy-handed response to protests, boycotts, and the Massachusetts Circular Letter convinced George Washington that a conspiracy existed and he “appears to have reached the point of longing for Americans to control their own destiny and secure their own interests” (47).

After the Boston Massacre, America seemed calm on the surface, but Ferling insists British Prime Minister Lord North was letting slip away the last chance to peacefully head off the American Revolution in early 1770. Economic pressures revolving around access to western lands, declining tobacco prices, debt, and slave trade prohibitions convinced colonists that their interests differed from their mother country’s. Politically, colonists came to view their government charters as a “Sacred Ark” (67), and they established standing Committees of Correspondence to facilitate concerted action. In spring 1773, “the colonial insurgency was on the cusp of reawakening. It was about to become a truly revolutionary movement” (72).

Provoked by the Boston Tea Party, Parliament overreacted when it passed the Intolerable Acts, which antagonized all of the colonies. Thomas Gage’s appointment as Governor-General of Massachusetts with the power to appoint the formerly elected council “set the Massachusetts hinterland on a truly revolutionary path” (87), thus initiating the third phase of colonial resistance. The First Continental Congress endorsed all seven of the Virginia Resolves, tabled Joseph Galloway’s “Plan of Union” for restructuring the empire to effect a reconciliation, created the Continental Association to enforce the trade boycott, and told the colonies to prepare their militias. The Association committees played a vital role in radicalizing the colonists, who, “whether or not they fully understood it, ... were coming to see themselves more as Americans than as British-Americans” (110).

Britain considered the First Continental Congress’s adoption of the Suffolk Resolves (Sept. 1774) as a declaration of war, and ordered General Gage to take military action. Well aware that his forces were too few to suppress the rebellion, Gage sought to disarm the disaffected colonists. Ferling argues that the resulting battles of Lexington and Concord, which ushered in the Revolution’s fourth phase, stemmed from the colonists’ desire to protect their homes and maintain local autonomy. He adroitly demonstrates how the needs of the war drove policy and hardened the political positions of conservatives and radicals in Congress over the issue of reconciliation versus independence. The war also spawned debates in the British ministry between hawks, who insisted on crushing the rebellion, and doves, who doubted the wisdom of such a course of action. The events of 1775, such as the creation of the Continental army, the Battle of Bunker Hill, Virginia Governor Lord Dunmore’s proclamation offering freedom to the slaves of rebels, and the burning of Falmouth and Norfolk further radicalized the Americans. “In quickening the desire for independence, nothing reshaped thinking so profoundly, and so quickly, as the war” (139).

1. In his *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* (1767–68).

Whirlwind traces the debate for independence in Congress, showing how the delegates' positions tended to lag behind popular opinion, and why the break with Great Britain became inevitable in 1776. Not only were colonies like New Hampshire and South Carolina petitioning Congress to create new governments, but Thomas Paine released his powerful propaganda piece, *Common Sense*, which undermined the legitimacy of monarchical rule. Furthermore, the war was not going well. The attempted liberation of Canada had failed, and American forces were in retreat. Ferling maintains that the desire for independence arose from

a loathing of Britain's new colonial policies, a sense of having been betrayed by the mother country ("Even brutes do not devour their young" was how Paine put it), restless personal ambition, economic incentives, an ever-growing realization of American distinctiveness, a compulsion to replace servility and the dependence on monarchy with the idealistic goals of a republican people, a yearning for America's destiny to be shaped by Americans, or dreams of social and political change that was possible only in an independent America. Inexorably, the war had been driving the colonists, congressmen as well as people of every walk of life in every colony, toward independence. Now the war dictated the timing of independence, for the Canadian misfortunes pointed to the very real possibility that the war could never be won and that without foreign help it almost certainly would be lost. (155)

In summer 1776, Gen. William Howe arrived in New York harbor with thirty-two thousand soldiers and 130 ships, hoping to quash the Revolution with military might. Unfortunately for Britain, Howe dithered, failing to execute his generally "well conceived" plans vigorously enough (174). Ferling praises Maj. Gen. Charles Lee's judgment that, though he could not hold New York City, he could make the British pay an unacceptably high price for it. Lee also convinced Washington to evacuate Manhattan after the American defeat at the Battle of Long Island. Thomas Paine's *The American Crisis* played a key role in the retreat across New Jersey, proving the value of ideology to the war effort. According to Ferling, the losses of 1776 caused Washington to trust his own judgment more and to meet with his subordinates individually rather than in full councils of war. His bold attacks at Trenton and Princeton revived American hope and ended Britain's "best chance to end the American Rebellion" (183).

Although disappointed with the outcome of the 1776 campaign, the British nurtured high hopes of suppressing the rebellion in 1777. Howe planned to capture the rebel capital at Philadelphia, while Gen. John Burgoyne led an invasion from Canada which sought to occupy Albany and secure the Hudson River, severing troublesome New England from the rest of the colonies. While Howe did manage to take Philadelphia, the length and difficulty of that operation prevented him from cooperating with Burgoyne's army, which ultimately surrendered to Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates after the battles of Saratoga.

The course of the war changed fundamentally in 1778 due to overt French participation on the American side. After Saratoga and Germantown, the French Foreign Minister Comte de Vergennes brokered a military alliance with the United States that threatened the British Isles with invasion and the loss of its other colonies around the globe. The prospect of a worldwide conflict led Britain to offer peace to the Americans on any terms short of independence. Although Ferling doubts the existence of the Conway Cabal to supplant Washington as commander in chief at this time, Congress actively praised Washington to give the public confidence, and he emerged from the imbroglio politically stronger than before. In Ferling's assessment, the year 1778 marked the end of the "bloody and arduous first phase of the Revolutionary War" (222).

Republican ideology and American political reforms took center stage in 1779 as the devaluation of Continental currency led Congress to delegate responsibility for paying the army to the states with taxes and confiscation of Loyalist property. On the military front, Washington opposed another invasion of Canada, Joseph Brandt led raids along the frontier, and Gen. John Sullivan destroyed the Iro-

quois nation in a punitive expedition. The successful British defense of Savannah was the only significant conventional action in North America.

The year 1780 marked a low point for the American cause. The Continental army suffered through a brutal winter at Morristown far worse than the storied Valley Forge winter. British forces captured Charleston, South Carolina, and its garrison of 6,700 men in the worst American defeat of the war. Finally, Benedict Arnold betrayed the colonists' cause in an attempt to sell West Point. Ferling writes that Britain's southern strategy fell apart with the commencement of a civil war in the region and the defeat at King's Mountain, which forestalled large-scale recruitment of Loyalists for military service. Nevertheless, "by 1781 the war had become a stalemate" (278), and only the victory at Yorktown turned the tide decisively in the Americans' favor.

Whirlwind persuasively answers three essential questions regarding the Revolutionary era. First, it explains why colonists who viewed themselves as proud members of the British Empire in 1763 led a continent-wide rebellion against their mother country a mere dozen years later. Ferling makes a cogent and nuanced case that economic exigencies determined the timing and scope of the rebellion. Second, he demonstrates that the war shaped the Revolution and tested the limits of republican rhetoric and ideals with ever greater sacrifices of men and materiel over eight long years. Finally, he proves that popular participation in both the Revolution and the war transformed the colonists' social structure from one based on deference to one suffused with egalitarianism.

Although *Whirlwind* is a work of synthesis and breaks no new ground, its emphasis on contingency and its use of statistics are most salutary. The United States was not preordained to break away from Great Britain. Instead, thirty thousand Continental soldiers gave their lives to secure independence. Ferling's narrative repeatedly demonstrates how the decisions of specific individuals could have prevented or ended the Revolution.

John Ferling's fine, single-volume history of the American Revolution and War of Independence is perfectly tailored for undergraduates and the educated public. It is a welcome, more comprehensive study than his earlier *Almost a Miracle*² and the perfect successor to Robert Middlekauff's aging classic *The Glorious Cause*.³

2. Subtitle: *The American Victory in the War of Independence* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2007).

3. Subtitle: *The American Revolution, 1763–1789* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1982).